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LIFE TERM IMPOSED IN ESPIONAGE CASE

Former Army Code Custodian
Admitted He Sold Secrets
to Soviet for \$131,000

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Oct. 16 (UPI) — Joseph George Helmich Jr., the former Army code custodian who admitted selling top-secret information to the Soviet Union for \$131,000 to get out of debt 18 years ago, was sentenced today to life in prison.

"Congress has expressed its views on the seriousness of this offense," said Federal District Judge Susan H. Black, adding that she thought Mr. Helmich should be "imprisoned for the remainder of his natural life."

Mr. Helmich, 44 years old, will be eligible for parole in 10 years. If he had been convicted on all four counts for which he was indicted, he would not have been eligible for 40 years.

Lighter sentences have been imposed in other recent espionage cases. Christopher J. Boyce, who was recently recaptured after escaping from a Federal prison, was serving a 40-year term for selling secrets about Central Intelligence Agency satellites to the Russians. Another former intelligence agency employee, David H. Barnett, received an 18-year sentence in January for selling sensitive information to Moscow. The judge in that case noted that the average sentence imposed in three espionage cases in 1979 was 46 years.

No Profit From Crime

Judge Black, when told that the former Army warrant officer might be planning to write a book about his experiences, also ruled that any future income deriving from his activities be paid to the Government.

On Sept. 28, four days into his trial, Mr. Helmich abruptly pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit espionage by giving the Russians a maintenance manual, technical details and key lists for the KL-7 Cryptosystem, a code machine, in 1963 and 1964.

Under the plea agreement, announced after the first week of his trial, the Government dropped the other three counts.

Mr. Helmich, who was the code custodian for the Army Signal Corps communications relay station in Paris, said he had decided to sell the information out of a "desperate need for \$500 to \$600." He said he had been ordered by his commanding officer to pay the debts he had run up or face a court-martial.

Honored by Russians

Testimony at the trial disclosed that he was promoted to colonel in the Russian Army and awarded a "hero's medal of the first order," which still hangs in the halls of the Kremlin.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, retired, the commander of American forces in Vietnam in the late 1960's, testified that if the enemy had had American codes, it could "read our mail" and know the United States' war plans.

In seeking mercy from the judge, a court-appointed attorney, Peter Dearing, presented letters and affidavits trying to minimize the damage Mr. Helmich had caused. He noted that the KL-7 information was now in the hands of 15 American allies, including France.

United States Attorney Gary Betz said Mr. Helmich was guilty of "a crime of greed and arrogance."

'Traitorous Acts'

"These traitorous acts of Mr. Helmich were of the highest degree," he said. "This crime strikes at the very fabric of our society. I request justice for our country."

Mr. Helmich had pleaded for leniency, saying that he had lived for 18 years "in my own private hell" and "with the knowledge of something I had done that kept me in fear and dread."

He requested and was granted permission to see his son, Kurt, 10, whom he has not seen since his arrest July 15.

Mr. Helmich's wife of 23 years, Billie Jean, said she thought the sentence was unfair and added, "I have no intention of leaving him."